DeafLife

Deaf Sports War

two sides, two different stories

THE DEAF SPORTS WAR

Is it AAAD versus Deaf athletes? NSAD and ABAD versus AAAD? In the feud between AAAD and banned grassroots sports organizations, who wins?

NSAD and ABAD are considered the true champions of the grassroots softball and basketball athletes. [We] believe that the new national organization will restore the competitive sporting spirit to the Deaf communities and bring unity [to] the Deaf Sports World.

— adapted from a NSAD/ABAD release

The AAAD does not, I repeat, DOES NOT control the American Deaf Sports Community!!! Get over it already. You cannot stop progress!

—Daniel J. Dillard

We care for every deaf athlete, from young to old, in many different sports. That's what the "new AAAD" is all about.

—Larry Fleischer, AAAD President

BACKGROUND

The American Athletic Association of the Deaf was founded by Art Kruger (1911-1992), and Edward C. Carney, Alexander Fleischman, Thomas Elliott, and other Deaf-sports enthusiasts, on April 13, 1945, just before the first national deaf basketball tournament was held in Akron, Ohio. Thirty representatives of Deaf clubs met at the Akron Club of the Deaf and, wanting to make the basketball tournament an annual event, voted to form a national organization. Beginning with 35 member clubs, the AAAD grew to include nearly 200.

As AAAD's first president, the energetic and dedicated Kruger drafted laws and procedures, and established a network of 7 (later 8) regional affiliates, with the AAAD serving as the governing body. These regions were: Central, Eastern, Farwest, Midwest, New England, Northwest, Southeast, and Southwest Athletic Associations of the Deaf (CAAD, EAAD, FAAD, MAAD, NEAAD, NWAAD, SEAAD, and SWAAD).

The AAAD is affiliated with and partially funded by the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) and is recognized by Comité International des Sports des Sourds (CISS), the international governing body of deaf sports, as the sole international representative of Deaf sports in the United States. One of the AAAD's most important functions is organizing and sponsoring U.S. participation in the summer and winter World Games of the Deaf. The AAAD also sponsors a biennial Deaf Sports Festival and WGD tryouts. It publishes a quarterly, Deaf Sports Review, and a newsletter, The AAAD Bulletin.

"OLD" BECOMES "NEW"

Over the years, more and more clubs joined the AAAD—but the essential structure of the AAAD remained basically unchanged. Recent years have seen the disintegration of the once-strong club network. With the growth of better telecommunications, TV, and the Internet, Deaf clubs are no longer the social and recreational centers of most deaf people's lives. More mainstreaming has also changed the way deaf students participate in sports.

In 1989, to better serve the needs of the community, the AAAD established a Restructure Committee, and held a summit meeting in November 1989 at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The AAAD Board of Directors, representatives of AAAD regions and Deaf sports organizations, athletes, coaches, and other leaders were also there.

After much discussion, participants agreed on a new organizational structure for the AAAD. The restructured or "new" AAAD was now an umbrella organization for 20 affiliated National Sports Organizations (NSOs), with a full-time Executive Director and home office. Under this new, streamlined structure, representatives of the NSOs, Deaf clubs, and regions would form a House of Delegates (HOD), which would be responsible for the by-laws and setting policy, and electing an Executive Board, itself responsible for the general administration of the AAAD. The NSOs would have freedom to conduct their own business and sports activities, elect their own officers/boards/representatives to the HOD, establish regions, and work with each other. The AAAD would serve as unifying body. These changes went into effect in 1993.

The following NSOs are affiliated with American Athletic Association of the Deaf: American Deaf Volleyball Association, Inc., American Hearing Impaired Hockey Association, Deaf Athletics Federation of the United States, National Deaf Golf Association, U.S. Aquatic Association of the Deaf, Inc., U.S. Deaf Badminton Association, Inc., U.S. Deaf Bowling Federation, U.S. Deaf Cycling Association, Inc., U.S. Deaf Skiers Association, Inc., U.S. Deaf Table Tennis Association, Inc., U.S. Deaf Team Handball Association, Inc., U.S. Deaf Tennis Association, Inc., U.S. Deaf Wrestling As-

lation, Inc., U.S. Deaf Flag Football of the Deaf, SA Deaf Basketball Association, U.S. Deaf Soccer Organization, USA Deaf Baseball, USA Deaf Softball, USA Deaf in Shooting Sports.

Until recently, the roster also included the American Basketball Association of the Deaf (ABAD) and the National Softball Association of the Deaf (NSAD). The rift between the AAAD and these two NSOs began in 1993 over a dispute about insurance and membership fees.

Grassroots versus elites:

Two distinct but interwoven tales

freely adapted from the January 10, 1997 ABAD/NSAD release posted on NSAD's World Wide Web page

The "New AAAD's" nightmare has begun, now that NSAD and ABAD have agreed to form a new national sports organization. (Its name will be announced shortly.) An advance copy of this article was sent to the AAAD. No one there would comment.

Dozens of interviews over past three years with deaf athletes and leaders—grassroots, recreational, and elite Deaf (WGD) alike—and examinations of documents, rules, news articles, and notes of meetings and conversations—reveal two distinct but interwoven tales.

The first is how AAAD got engulfed in the deepest crisis of its existence. AAAD has lost a large number of members by pitting elite WGD members, intellectuals, and articulate non-athletic members—loyal supporters of the "New AAAD"—against the most unlikely of foes: grassroots Deaf athletes and communities—loyal supporters of the "Old AAAD."

The second shows how ill-equipped the AAAD Board of Directors has been, how casually business has sometimes been conducted, and suggests why the grassroots sports organizations are so zealous in their resistance—a concerted effort made by groups of unconquered grassroots deaf-sports organizations —and why they've been so unwilling to accept the "New AAAD."

The first signs of trouble came immediately after AAAD dropped its player insurance and refused to reimburse insurance fees. Deaf clubs and players began asking regional deaf-sports organizations to "break away" from the AAAD. After learning that USOC would provide lots of money to them if they promoted and supported elite Deaf athletes and WGDers, AAAD suddenly adopted a "new" philosophy of serving the elite athletes and WGDers almost exclusively.

There were persistent questions about how AAAD President Larry Fleischer and AAAD Executive Director Shirley Platt conducted their business with the elite and grassroots (non-elite) athletes. Officers of the "New NSOs" appointed by the AAAD (and this was done without obtaining approval from the grassroots members) bent over backwards to praise Larry and Shirley and the "New" AAAD.

Many former and active elite Deaf athletes were invited to form new organizations as NSOs affiliated with the AAAD. Board members were chosen not for their knowledge of the sports industry but for their names, connections, and influence. Several of these had no business being on the board nor leading NSOs because they didn't understand the business. This is a common practice with many other organizations: you put on a family member; you put on friends; you put on "safe people" who go along and don't ask too many questions.

NSOs got annual grants, mostly from the AAAD, which required each officer to meet with his/her colleagues and AAAD officers a few times a year to make decisions on many short-range and long-range plans and goals.

Since 1995, AAAD has helped form over 20 new NSOs. Fleischer calls these "a monument to our success." But the AAAD's strategy has shifted away from serving the needs of grassroots athletes to catering to the elite. A major problem is the mindset of the elite members of the NSOs. They consider Platt and Fleischer the "experts and top in the world." If they think that Platt and Fleischer have a new vision and their plans are as "good as a gold medal," why would they question them?

During the past three years, the vast majority of the grassroots Deaf athletes have expressed their displeasure at these changes and are staying away from the "New" AAAD. They are accusing Platt, Fleischer, and the AAAD Board of gross negligence and breach of contract. AAAD officers and Board members have "gambled" their members' money on high-risk strategies by publicly banning any deaf sports organization that refuses to follow AAAD's wishes. These bad decisions are costing the AAAD a lot in lost membership revenues, imposing an additional financial hardship on young elite athletes, and threaten to destroy Deaf sporting spirit and community pride.

Many grassroots sports organizations and athletes are staying away from the AAAD as long as its mission is to serve the WGDers and elite athletes, and to continue this banning business.

Many Deaf athletes are agitated and seething with anger. They feel disdain and disgust when they see young, innocent WGD athletes proudly supporting the AAAD because they're getting a "free ride" from the AAAD. But after getting a bit of experience, many don't want to be associated with the AAAD; they've lost confidence in it. This is the kind of thing that deafies tend to uncomplainingly accept as a normal part of our lives in the deaf world/culture.

Students in schools for the deaf and members of the deaf culture have taken pride in playing sports under the AAAD banner. But their old pride in playing under the AAAD is gone. What does this mean for the future of Death athletics? For the Deaf Sports World? Our pride has been brought to the brink of total collapse.

"The 'New AAAD's' strategy has shifted from serving the needs of grassroots athletes to catering to the elite."
— David D. Stout

Lately, Fleischer has been making false statements in various newspapers for the Deaf and through E-mail. Unfortunately, those newspapers published his statements without first verifying the facts and their sources.

Fleischer has claimed that he's ready to sit down and talk anytime. The truth is that he never made the initial move. Either NSAD found out he's in town nearby and initiated a meeting, or the NSO officers put pressure on him to get going!

In his November 1996 DeafNation interview, Billy Schwall asked Platt and Fleischer a good question about the possibility of having unity. Naturally, we agree with their answers. The truth is that Platt and Fleischer don't practice it. [Schwall] could have asked any regional and local deaf-sports organizations if this is true. AAAD, once again, has manipulated the public with half-truths and twisted information about NSAD and ABAD.

We, the common grassroots deafies, will get through this. AAAD and the self-perpetuating elite deaf members can take everything away from us, but AAAD will never be able to take away the spirits of the grassroots deaf athletes. We, the common grassroots deafies, will always be a family.

NSAD-ABAD and the eight nationally-known regional sports organizations (NEAAD, EAAD, SEAAD, CAAD, SWAAD, MAAD, FAAD, and NWAAD) will always maintain these principles to the end.

David D. Stout
Interim President, NSAD/ABAD

Bring back the "old AAAD"— by destroying the "new AAAD"?

Larry Fleischer's response to David Stout's news release of January 3, issued on January 10, 1997

David Stout's recent article that howled at the AAAD, and at me in particular, as President of the AAAD, was written, as usual, without substantiating his claims. He continues to stir unnecessary and senseless excitement with the hope that the AAAD will someday be destroyed. Unquestionably, he has engineered a mass hysteria against the AAAD, even with the erroneous facts he spread around. Oftentimes he, like many others, makes assumptions about the AAAD without checking with us first to ensure the accuracy of his information. His continued outpouring of anger over the well-reasoned bans by the AAAD on the NSAD and ABAD have clouded his clear thinking. Simply stated, he wants the "old AAAD" back without a clear understanding of the "new AAAD."

Deaf players/athletes, as a result, are very confused about what is really supposed to happen with the "new AAAD" because the truth about the "new AAAD" never got out to them. David and his group kept going about in their cunning way, blaming the AAAD for all problems. It never ceases to amaze me that David, a deaf sports leader, has not yet grasped the fact that the "new AAAD" cares for grassroots athletes far more than the "old AAAD" cared for them.

It is pointless to continue to talk further about what David has done to the AAAD because there are many important tasks for us to accomplish in

rder to enrich and benefit deaf athletes. Time and energy must be channeled properly and efficiently to ensure greater opportunities for all deaf athletes. Let me reiterate the three main goals of the AAAD (in no specific ranking order):

1. To bring the USA team to the Winter and Summer World Games for the Deaf;

2. To work in harmony with the National Sports Organizations (NSOs) and to foster each NSO to become an even better organization;

3. To promote physical fitness for every deaf American through sports.

I have no problem with the idea of bringing back the "old AAAD" through the wishes of the deaf majority, but one needs to understand first what that really means in comparison with the "new AAAD." Jim Oldham's article in [a Deaf publication last June] accurately reflects the intent and spirit of the combined NSAD and ABAD toward the "old AAAD." The "old AAAD" means:

1. The basketball and softball groups control the AAAD with no sensitivity and attention given to other sports. A big imbalance there!

2. The WGD is a separate entity, which is often swept under the rug. During an annual meeting, basketball delegates make decisions that affect the WGD (without a real understanding of essential requirements). Another big imbalance there!

3. No caring for coaching or official development.

4. No caring for deaf women and youth in different sports.

5. No caring for deaf athletes of all ages in many and varied sports.

6. No caring for a checks-and-balance system for the rights of deaf athletes.

7. No caring for the right mix of deaf athletes to represent the AAAD even though the AAAD is supposed to serve all sports.

8. No caring for the CISS international regulations.

9. No caring for the idea of an AAAD Home Office to provide a centrality for information and services to benefit deaf athletes.

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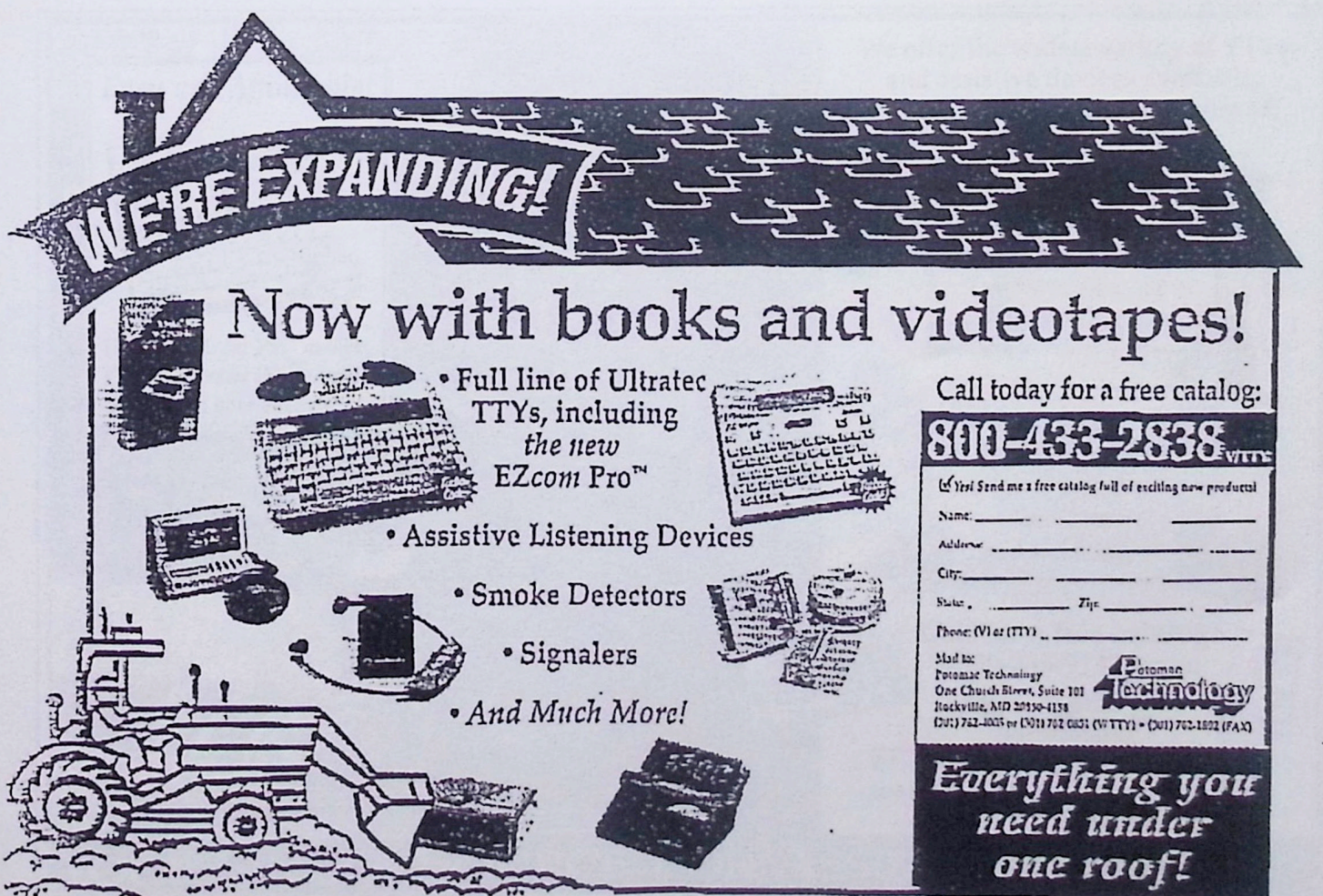
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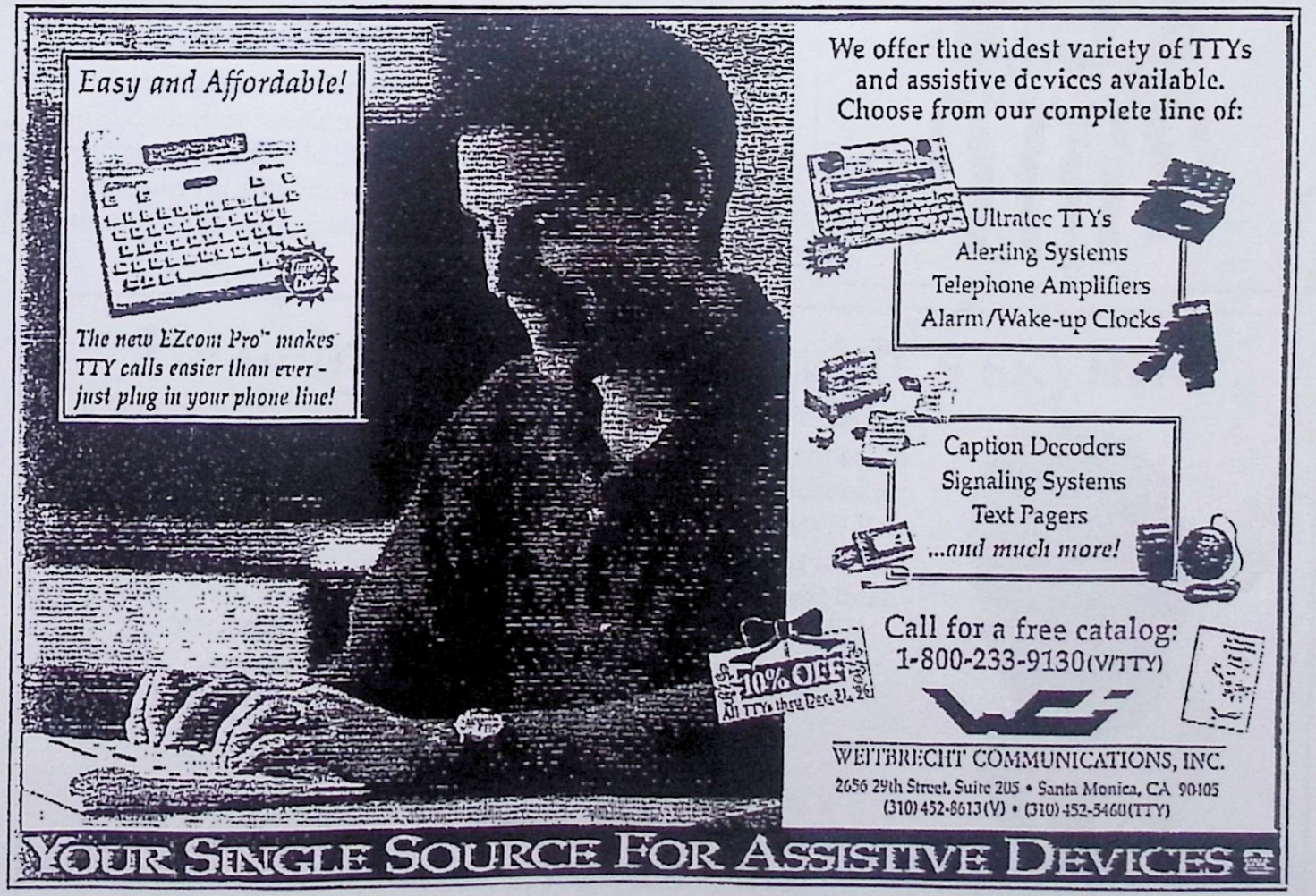
10. No caring for improving public relations with outsiders to the AAAD circles.

In the past five years, the AAAD has experienced "growing pains" in its operations, programs, and funding—basically in response to the recommendations made during the AAAD restructuring, which the AAAD delegates adopted on April 4, 1990 in Phoenix, Arizona. The recommendations as outlined in the document are:

1. Reorganize under a new structure and governing plan.
2. Change and update goals and objectives.
3. Establish a Home Office with a Home Office staff.
4. Form National Sports Organizations.
5. Establish a 4-year budget cycle.
6. Restructure dues and fees charged to participants, clubs, members, etc.
7. Establish new guidelines for committee functions.
8. Improve public relations and recruitment of athletes.
9. Improve fundraising.
10. Expand the AAAD to include recreation.
11. Make athlete and coach development a top priority.

Since then, the AAAD has accomplished many of the stated goals to improve and modernize the organization from the time of the "old AAAD," so that we will be able to better deal with future responsibilities to all deaf athletes. That's what the "new AAAD" is all about. We do care for every deaf athlete, from young to old, in many different sports. There is no confusion on the part of the AAAD about striving for an efficient organization through national sports organizations and deaf member clubs, since they play a very important role in the deaf athletic movement in the United States. For the AAAD to be a healthy and well-run organization, it is an undeniable fact that a membership base and support system must work in tandem with the desired goals as mandated by deaf sports leaders and athletes some years ago.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Presently, our membership base is needlessly low and far from the projected level. I am very concerned about the future of our deaf athletes because, deep inside, I know that the "new AAAD" serves deaf athletes in more and better ways. Unfortunately, many of them continue to be defenseless pawns held tight in the grips of the NSAD and ABAD leaders. It is not surprising that the NSAD/ABAD leaders value their own needs more than the needs of the players. To date, this appears to be the case.

Whenever I have been asked to give presentations about the "new AAAD," I have never failed to receive positive responses, once people understood what the changes meant. They have often said that the "new AAAD" makes more sense to them. We all know that it is not often easy to grasp new ideas quickly. There is no way for anyone to make a good and correct decision until he/she seeks the necessary facts and information to make an informed choice. For this reason, I would definitely welcome the opportunity to challenge David Stout to a debate anyplace and at any time with you there! Without you present, I would be wasting my time to talk to David alone. I'm not sure, however, if David would be willing to come forward and face me in a debate. He knows that I do not make statements with half-truths and twisted information.

"Whenever I have been asked to give presentations about the 'new AAAD,' I have never failed to receive positive responses, once people understood what the changes meant."

— Larry Fleischer

With your help and support, we can put a stop to this senseless fighting and work together in the bests interests of deaf athletes. There is no reason why we cannot do that. Ultimately, David Stout's "crying wolf" about the AAAD and me must be stopped, because his howling offers no benefits to deaf athletes.

Lawrence W. Fleischer
President
American Athletic
Association of the Deaf

See next month's issue
for part 2 of "The Deaf Sports War."

He helped shape Nashville's skyline.

Thomas Scott Marr was a "phenomenally successful" architect who designed a huge number of buildings in a variety of styles in and outside of Nashville, including the Tennessee School for the Deaf campus, luxury hotels, and a sleek Art Deco-style Post Office that's still in use. He was "a warm and generous friend" to the Deaf community. And he's one of the many great deaf Americans featured in our new book. Available NOW!

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